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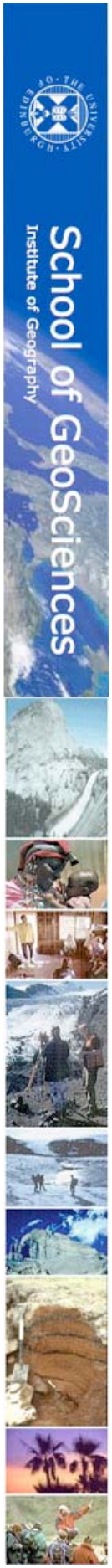
Caring for Nature: subjectivity, boundaries and environment.

Dr. Andrea Nightingale

Institute of Geography,
School of Geosciences,
University of Edinburgh,
Drummond St,
Edinburgh EH8 9XP
andrea.nightingale@ed.ac.uk



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Commentary

Caring for Nature: subjectivity, boundaries and environment

The environmental movement has brought to the mainstream ideas about how to care, love and protect 'nature'. Many people passionately propound these ideas and are scornful or morally outraged at others who objectify, exploit and damage 'natural environments'. Importantly, their moral outrage outlines a clear polarisation between these two positions. Yet the division between protection/love and exploitation/damage is far more complex and contested. There are those who share a deep love and respect for the land and yet treat natural environments in damaging ways to sustain their livelihoods. And it cannot be forgotten that many of the most passionate environmentalists are people living relatively privileged lifestyles that are rife with environmentally damaging chemicals, practices and objects (White, 1996). Given these contradictions, I am interested in investigating how emotional attachments to 'nature' are linked to people's behaviours towards their environments. I am particularly interested in exploring this with people who work with 'natural' resources in one way or another for a living. How is it that people whose livelihoods depend on 'natural' environments embody apparently contradictory relationships to those environments?

In this paper I want to propose a new research direction that builds from current work on nature-society geographies. I begin by reviewing work on nature-society issues and discuss the extent to which this literature helps us to understand the contradictions between emotion, intent and action in relation to ecological environments. I argue that while important insights have been contributed from this literature, by drawing from feminist and post-structural literatures on subjectivity and psychoanalysis, we can gain a greater grasp on the links between action, ethics, emotion and subjectivity. Fundamentally, I demonstrate how despite a recognition that nature and society are inextricably linked, nature-society studies assume a more or less stable boundary between the subjective experiences of persons and the environments with which they interact. Yet, feminist and psychoanalytic work has shown how this boundary is not stable. This insight opens up new conceptual space to rethink the nature-society nexus.

Before going any further, however, I need to explain more clearly what I mean by 'natural' or 'ecological environments'. I understand environment to include anything outside of the self, and as I argue below, is therefore inherently a fluctuating concept as what is considered outside of the self is not necessarily straightforward or stable. In addition, I take seriously insights from nature-society geographies that explore the problematic construction of 'nature' as something opposed to 'society', and rather treat nature as a social concept that is culturally and historically specific. Nevertheless, I want to focus my inquiry around material environments—that which is taken-for-granted as 'nature' by many people. Therefore when I refer to ecological environments I deliberately invoke an idea of nature that is embedded within ecological science. By using this conceptualisation of environment, I also want to challenge it and think through how ecological environments are constructed as 'other'

and the consequences of this for producing and sustaining emotive and ethical behaviours and beliefs.

Nature-Society Geographies

Nature-society studies within geography and related disciplines have burgeoned within the past ten years leading to a tremendous amount of theoretical and empirical diversity. I do not attempt to review all of this literature here, but rather to highlight key themes that are closely linked to my core argument. Throughout this literature, studies of nature-society relations have tended to move from instrumental human impact studies, common in the 1970s, to work that takes seriously post-structural insights about the division between nature and society. This post-structural work emphasises the problematic distinction between nature and society, and argues that everything is always already natural *and* social. The boundary between them is untenable because nature can only be understood through social processes, making any conceptualisation of environment or the natural world a social product. The distinction is also not supported materially as humans are never separate from the metabolic and technological processes of the 'non-human' around us. Many of these studies thus seek to undermine the binary thinking that underpins a clear separation between nature and society (Castree and Braun, 2001, Demeritt, 2001, Murdoch, 1997, Haraway, 1997, Cronon, 1996, Whatmore, 2002).

In this section I want to pull out three key themes within the nature-society literature that help to illuminate and explain why people embody the kinds of contradictory relationships to environments I outlined above. First, I look at studies of identity and environments to examine how people's understandings of and actions towards their environment are linked to their social identities. Second, I discuss the politics of 'environment' and how discursive constructions allow for particular ethical stances and actions. Finally, I explore work that demonstrates how human and non-human others become enrolled in and co-produce particular kinds of environments—environments that are inherently social and natural.

Political ecologists have explored the ways that people with different identities construct and act upon their environments in different ways (Zimmerer, 1996, Nesbitt and Weiner, 2001) leading to very different management options for coping with environmental change. Zimmerer's (1996) work on soil erosion in Bolivia demonstrated how people from different social positions based in part on age and education understood mass movement ('soil erosion') in very different terms, and drew from very different conceptualisations of environment to argue for their own preferred management strategies. Central to Zimmerer's objective was to demonstrate that these discourses of soil erosion are linked to people's identities and is closely related to how these opposing discourses are inextricably bound up in social relations. This and similar work (Nesbitt and Weiner, 2001, Mackenzie, 1998, Mackenzie, 2002, Jarosz, 1996, Escobar, 1995) has been extremely important in challenging the idea that environmental management is based on science alone or that environments are universally understood.

Most of this work has been done in the context of relatively fixed understandings of identity and identification processes such that the discourses people invoke and their identities are assumed to be constant. The Bolivian study for example (Zimmerer, 1996) assumes a socially consistent identity that can be associated with particular

discourses. Feminist work has insisted on the fluidity of identities allowing for identities to shift with context and over time (Radcliffe, 1993, Nicholson, 1990, McDowell, 1999, Probyn, 2003, Bondi and Davidson, 2003, Thomas, 2002). My work has explored how discourses are linked to strategic mobilisation of multiple and overlapping identities such that careful attention to the contexts within which people invoke and contest both identity and resource access claims are critical to how environmental change is conceptualised and addressed (Nightingale, 2006). A fluid notion of identity is more consistent with a relational and contextual understanding of subjectivity (see below) allowing an exploration of how subjectivities are linked to particular ecological and social contexts. I argue there is a need to understand how these processes work at different scales such that particular forms of environmental action are possible while others are less likely.

More recently, political ecologists have explored the links between politics and ethics in relation to the environment (Bryant and Jarosz, 2004). A lot of this work has focused on various aspects of animal geographies, including how animals are constructed as other, absolving us of the need to apply the same moral obligations to them (Philo and Wilbert, 2000, Whatmore, 2002). Working from an environmental ethics paradigm, Neumann (2004) has described the ethical issues surrounding the protection of biodiversity in African game parks. Many parks in Africa have a shoot-on-site policy for poaching, leading to many incidents of torture and murder in the name of wildlife protection. Neumann explains how these policies are far more draconian than any instituted during the colonial period and entirely unethical given that no countries have the death penalty for poaching. Shoot-on-site policies have arisen and are only tolerated within a discursive framing of African peasants as savage, amoral others, in contrast to the "conservation-minded hunter/European, and the intelligent and social wild animal." (Neumann, 2004 p. 833). Neumann argues that this discursive framing and the rhetoric of 'war' within biodiversity conservation makes possible the unethical treatment of humans in the name of animal protection. While he does not discuss it in these terms, Neumann's work illustrates the formation of subjectivities in relation to specific environments and the political consequences of such subjectivities.

Whatmore (2002) has sought to take this work further and think through relational ethics in an attempt to avoid invoking the human/non-human boundary. Instead she argues for a relational frame wherein ethical consideration is rooted in the emergent, affective relations between heterogeneous socio-natural bodies, as opposed an ethics dependent on stable moral communities (Whatmore, 2002). This work highlights the importance of considering ethics in relation to the hybrid human/non-human world and the need for new ethical paradigms to work through such issues.

Many of these themes come together within Bruce Braun's (2002) work on Clayoquot Sound on Canada's west coast. Drawing from post-structural and feminist theory he has illustrated that depending on one's identity, history and use of the land, the Sound is either a timber resource to be exploited, an example of pristine nature to be consumed and venerated, or one's home with a myriad of cultural histories and uses of the environment. These often conflicting, emotionally-laden understandings of nature in part have been produced through colonial and neo-colonial social relations that were embedded within the scientific methods and maps of early explorers (Braun, 2002). The environment of the Canadian west coast, as we understand it, is thus

deeply political, contested and materially manifest within social relations as well as the forest itself. This analysis helps us to understand how more than one rainforest inhabits the same spatial extent drawing into question any attempts to stabilise spatially or socially *the* rainforest.

Through his examples, Braun (2002) argues that the rainforest itself is produced by social relations and the ontologies used to make sense of it, thus what the rainforest is, discursively and materially is different for people occupying different subject positions. Yet what this work stops short of understanding is how the rainforest itself is constitutive of those subject positions in non-determinist but nevertheless specific ways. As in African game parks, the material environment of Clayoquot Sound is not insignificant in circumscribing how subject positions are constituted and indeed, is inseparable from the ecological consequences for the Sound.

One of the examples that Braun (2002) elaborates is that of the adventure tourist. Adventure tourism is crucial for constructing Clayoquot Sound as a space of pristine nature where one can travel to experience the full power of nature. These activities are deeply embedded in producing and maintaining an image of the Sound as a space for preservation away from modernity. What I also want to explore, however, is how the experience of the adventure tourist then re-shapes the subject positions of people and the consequences of this re-shaping not only for places like Clayoquot Sound but also for the environments to which the adventure tourist returns. Thus, in this case, an investigation into the ways in which Clayoquot Sound in its material specificities produces the subject position of the 'adventure tourist' is integral to how then those people mobilise and translate this subject position into other environments such as downtown Vancouver. The consequences of this shift in subject positions for the ecology of both the Sound and Vancouver is then crucial to investigate as a continually constitutive process. What I am suggesting is that the subject positions described by Braun arise in relation to Clayoquot Sound in very specific ways and these ways are closely linked to the material and discursive interactions (whether they be in the forest or from afar) of subjects with their environments.

The positioning of subjects within networks of relations has been attended to by Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Callon, 1986, Latour, 1993, Latour, 1997, Murdoch, 1997, Murdoch, 1998) and the approaches used by Braun, Whatmore and Neumann are at least in part inspired by it. ANT conceptualises humans and non-humans in relational networks that allow for both humans and ‘things’ (actants) to have agency within the processes that produce particular kinds of socio-environments. The analysis offered here differs from ANT in focusing on subjectivity instead of agency. As others have pointed out (Laurier and Philo, 1999), ANT insufficiently conceptualises agency such that it is difficult to distinguish between human and non-human agency. How/why is it that in particular circumstances some actants are able to recruit allies and others are not? Clearly, the ability of all actants to have agency is not equivalent as studies of social power illustrate. It strikes me as therefore even more problematic to bring non-human actors into relational networks without conceptualising how power operates within those networks. Feminist theories of subjectivity are concerned with the production of selves within contexts that are always imbued with power and these theories therefore offer conceptual resources for understanding relations of power within the nature-society nexus.

To briefly summarise, the nature-society literature moves towards dismantling the separation of environment-self (nature-society) and suggests instead that societies and environments are co-produced, seriously undermining attempts to analyse the impact of society *on* nature. It is not a question of protecting the environment, but rather how it is that our conceptualisations of nature, social relations and cultural politics are constitutive of and derived from both the human and non-human with particular social and ecological outcomes. This work goes some way to understanding how groups of people come to be in relation with particular environments in specific ways and the network of relations that sustain those configurations. Yet, this work cannot explain why it is that people damage environments that they care about, seek to protect and often, acknowledge that their actions might be harmful.

I suggest that to explain the contradictions between ethics, emotion and action, issues of subjectivity and identity are central. The processes of identity formation are not well understood, but are clearly related to subjectivity and the formation of selves (Butler 1997; Craib 1998; Henriques *et al.* 1984). These processes have been shown to be linked to the social and spatial environments within which people interact, demonstrating further the importance of context in identification processes (Thomas, 2002).

Subjectivity, selves and boundaries

The key to unpacking these unexplored links between emotion, action and discourses I hypothesize, lies in processes entailed in the differentiation between (culturally variable conceptions of) selves and environments. The boundary between self and environment is not straightforward (e.g. Davidson 2003), yet most theoretical work takes it for granted (see also Longhurst, 2003). Where that boundary is individually and socially constructed is a critical aspect of how people behave in relation to what they perceive to be "outside" of themselves; in other words to their environments.

In order to explore the boundaries between selves and environments, I draw from post-structural feminist and psychoanalytic theories to investigate subjectivities and how they are produced in particular environments. Feminist geographers have examined issues of subjectivity for quite some time and a number of insights have emerged from this work (e.g. Bondi *et al.* 2002). Subjectivity refers to the production of subject positions–the repertoire of possibilities into which "subjects" are recruited, temporarily and often unwittingly (Butler 1997). As Probyn (2003) defines it, subjectivity is closely linked to Althusser's ideas of ideology and the ways in which individuals are 'hailed by' or interpellated into subject positions such as race, sex, class, or gender. These subject positions are not stable and are (re)produced in the contexts within which identity claims are made and performed. Thus subjectivity is something that entails processes that are "fluid" but also "sticky" and therefore tend to become stabilised through complex combinations of psycho-social and socio-spatial processes (Bauman 2000; Butler 1997; Henriques *et al.* 1984; Massey 1994). Gender is an excellent example. Defining *a* subject position "woman" is highly problematic, but those defined (at birth) as biological females are swiftly recruited into, and find it very difficult to escape, subject positions that are constituted around notions of "woman" (Butler, 1990).

Within geography and feminist theory, a great deal of attention has been paid to the embodied, discursive and social processes that produce subjectivity (Longhurst 2001;

Rose 1993). Longhurst (2003) outlines three main themes of theoretical development around the subject within Geography. First, subjectivities are always placed, in other words subject positions do not exist in the abstract, devoid of context, but rather are performed within specific places and spaces. Examples from the literature include the gym, the typing pool and the aeroplane isle (Bondi and Davidson, 2003). Second, subjectivities are embodied and as such are material. Here work on gender, race and ethnicity is particularly salient (Longhurst, 2003). Third, the politics of subjectivity have been highlighted with particular attention to resistance and the ways in which resistance is always contradictory and often paradoxical (Longhurst, 2003, Nightingale, 2006, Mahoney and Yngvesson, 1992). This work on subjectivity has expanded on the highly abstract work of Butler and Foucault to think through the everyday practices and spaces of subjectivity. What emerges is an understanding of subjectivity and space that insists that subjectivities and space are interactive and mutually constituted.

Theorisations on subjectivity and space thus begin to open up questions about how environments and selves are co-produced and the network of relations that sustain subjectivities, yet ecological environments have been notably absent from much of this work. Early theorising in feminist geography insisted on the role that social relations play in the production of space and place (e.g. McDowell 1983; Mackenzie and Rose 1993), but this is a different argument from theorising how space, place and nature *produce* subjectivities. In addition, this work has not explored issues of boundaries and how the boundaries between self and other are implicated in the processes of subject formation. More recent work on subjectivity and space brings to the fore questions of boundaries and how subjectivities are bounded by and in turn bound space and place (Longhurst, 2003, Bondi and Davidson, 2003). Work on agoraphobia in particular has been useful in thinking through boundaries as many people suffering from agoraphobia describe an inability to draw a clear boundary between themselves and their environments (Davidson 2003).

Working from a different paradigm, Kay Milton (2002) has examined how emotions and identification are part of forming attachments to environments and play into how we perceive and use the environment. Her work lays an important foundation from which this work will proceed, but I suggest that we need to focus more explicitly on post-structural theories of subjectivity to understand the production of selves and how it is that subjectivities and environments are mutually constituted. Milton (2002) has argued that if people can identify with aspects of their ecological environment as being like themselves in one way or another, they are more likely to treat that environment as they might themselves or another person. I would like to move away from an explicit focus on identification and rather think about the process of subject formation and how that process is embedded within and indeed inextricable from both relations of power and the socio-natural environments within which subjects emerge.

Similarly, within psychoanalytic theory, some work begins with undifferentiation as an assumed starting point for psychoanalysis (e.g. Winnicott 1971; Wright 1991). People develop a sense of self in relation to others and the contexts in which they operate, and thus environment is not insignificant in shaping subjectivity. In this work "environment" refers primarily to interpersonal relationships but does not rule out relationships with non-human others. There is, therefore, scope to explore in-depth the

extent to which psychoanalytic perspectives might contribute to understanding the mutual constitution of subjectivity and non-human environments more generally.

Finally, work on subjectivity has focused on power and how it operates in daily practice (Mahoney and Yngvesson, 1992, Butler, 1997, Butler, 1990). Such work has much to offer to an analysis of environmental issues since whether people comply with institutionalised rules (for conservation), I suggest, is integrally bound up in daily contestations over identity and self and other. Judith Butler (1997) describes "the subject" as "the effect of power in recoil" (p. 6) and argues that "in the act of opposing subordination, the subject reiterates its subjection" (p. 11). Thus subjects are always already embedded within relations of power, relations which cannot be overlooked when exploring how people come to care about and seek to protect their environments.

Conclusion

What emerges from these issues is that the processes of boundary making are part of conflicts over resources. Such boundaries operate at several scales and levels of abstraction. For example, how people conceptualise the boundary between themselves and their environment is central to how they form notions of a realm "outside" of themselves, which has implications for how they treat those environments. Such boundaries are central to a sense of alienation from nature that has been argued to be at the heart of modern over-exploitation of resources (Milton, 2002). Conceptualised in this way, it opens up space for exploring the contradictions and contestations over whether people love and care for their environment or exploit it without needing to cast people within fixed identities or relationships with 'nature'. At other scales, how people conceptualise boundaries between themselves and other people are key to whether they will act for some notion of a collective good. In what contexts and in relation to which kinds of "others" people will work together needs to be addressed in order to form effective groups to address environmental issues. Many people who work the land do have a sense of their resources and of belonging to a community, so why they choose to work together to protect their environment in some contexts but not in others is a question that needs to be addressed at the levels of subjectivity, community, politics and economics. All of these factors are integral to the complex interplay between, and mutual constitution of, subjectivities and environments.

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